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To me it seems as if our clergy incur a very grave responsibility when they neglect an agency that has been so signally owned and blessed of God.



## Modern Criticism and Candidates for Ordination.

By F. E. PARGITER, M.A.

THE supply of candidates for ordination in the Church of England is a matter of the first importance. For some years past the number has steadily diminished, and at present appears to have become somewhat stationary at a low figure. The diminution has been noticed with concern by the authorities in the Church. Various reasons have been suggested, and no doubt the change is the result of various factors, for the conditions are complex. This is indicated by the statement which has been made on authority, that the diminution is among candidates of higher social position, while those of lower position continue to present themselves in much the same number as formerly. The main factors therefore are such as influence the former rather than the latter.

It is not the intention of this article to discuss the whole question, but rather to deal with one matter, which is of the greatest importance, and yet has hardly been brought into such prominence as should be given to it in this connection. It is the subject of belief in the Holy Scriptures as affected by the Higher Criticism.

It is obvious that the position of the teachers of a religion which is based on sacred writings is related most closely to the authority of those writings—that is, to their genuineness and trustworthiness when critically examined. The Bible has been subjected to a rigorous scrutiny in its nature as a collection of books written by different authors in different ages, and the conclusions which have been enunciated by the Higher Criticism necessarily concern all those who have, or will have, to teach it.

The aim of this paper is not to attempt to criticize those conclusions, but simply to examine what their influence and effect must be on such persons. As most men who take or decline Holy Orders do so when they are young, and can hardly be considered specialists in the Higher Criticism, their knowledge of its results is much the same as the general impression held among ordinary people regarding the matter; hence it is necessary to consider what that impression is.

To ascertain this it is necessary to see what are the results of criticism in plain language. This cannot be avoided. Ordinary people cannot, or at any rate do not, follow elaborate critical discussions or exercise any personal judgment upon the arguments used by critics. They want to get at the essential results and to ascertain them in plain language. Information of this kind is given from time to time in books or articles intended for the public, yet even such publications employ some of the phraseology used by criticism, and adhere to a cautious treatment out of deference, no doubt, to general Christian belief. Plainness, however, must go further, because ordinary people translate such phraseology into language commonly intelligible, and it is that presentment of the results which gains currency among them and influences their ideas.

Now, it is not quite easy to state those conclusions generally in plain language, to which no objection can be made, and the reason is this: Every department of knowledge has its own method of expressing itself and its own special terms; and this is true as regards the discussions of the Higher Criticism, which, as they concern the religious views of both the critics and their readers, are couched at times in suggestive or covert phraseology (these words are used in no offensive sense) rather than stated in clear-cut and definite language. The consequence is that, when one attempts to express the conclusions in plain language which everyone can understand, one may be charged with misrepresenting them. As an illustration of the difficulty may be mentioned such phrases as "religious genius" and "prophetic imagination." Such words are not always defined,

and though they may seem on their face to be simple, it is not easy to say what precise meaning they are intended to convey; and at times they appear elusive, like some terms that science once used, such as "vital force" and "phlogiston."

Moreover, when it is stated by criticism that a particular narrative is not an accurate historical version of facts, but, rather, that the writer has idealized the past without any intention to pervert history, what would be a just presentment of this conclusion in plain language? How does the narrative differ materially from an historical novel? Put into plain language the statement must mean that the narrative is not authentic and the alleged facts cannot be accepted as wholly true. Criticism sifts facts and undertakes to distinguish what is true from what is not true approximately; but the ordinary man, who takes the net result in plain terms, often puts it bluntly, that the account is not to be taken as true.

As a further illustration may be noticed the distinction drawn by criticism between various kinds of authorship of the scriptural books. In one case the professed or reputed author of a book really wrote it, either wholly himself or by working earlier materials in with his own material. Such a book would be genuine. In another case criticism declares that the alleged author did not write the book, but that it presumably contains matter written by him; some later person worked that up with his own matter into the book, and the whole was then attributed to the former. Such a book as it stands is not the genuine work of the alleged author, and any portion of it can be attributed to him only with some degree of probability. In plain language it is spurious, except conjecturally in part. In yet another case the alleged author had nothing to do with the book; it was written by some later person, and was falsely ascribed to the former. Such a book in plain language is a forgery.

If, then, one should express the general or main conclusions of moderate Higher Criticism regarding the books of the whole Bible in plain language, with the fullest desire to do so fairly,

the following seems to be a fair summary : Of the books, some were written by the persons by whom, and at the time when, they profess or are reputed to have been written ; but a large number were not so written, and the rest are not free from doubt in this respect. The facts and incidents mentioned are not always historically trustworthy ; even where trustworthy they are not always to be accepted as wholly correct ; and sometimes they are legend or fiction. The laws and ordinances of all kinds enjoined in the Old Testament are not as ancient as they profess to be, and most of them were compiled in later times. The prophecies were either written about the time of the events to which they refer, or were surmises about the near future, or were rhapsodies about an ideal future.

This summary, it is submitted, is as near a fair statement of the general conclusions as one can express in plain language ; but, whether it be allowed to be fair or not, or a better one be offered, the general conclusions have been more destructive than confirmatory as ordinary people understand confirmation. Inspiration is acknowledged, but what the acknowledgment amounts to it is hard to define. The plain man is impressed by the erudition of the critics, and naturally bows to their authority. He does not venture to make any review of their decisions, but accepts them, not only on critical matters proper, but also on all other matters, even those which require some experience of the world, and which therefore are not altogether beyond his ken.

How then stands the position of those who have to teach the Bible ? What validity has it according to these conclusions to attract candidates for ordination ? What authority can they assert for it over their hearers ? Before dealing with these questions it is well to turn to another religion, that has been passing through a crisis in which criticism has exercised a clearer, more potent, and profounder influence — namely, Hinduism. The results can be studied there dispassionately, and the inquiry has all the interest that a comparison of things which are now actually taking place can offer.

Since Hindu sacred literature was laid bare to the examination of scholars by the discovery (now more than a century ago) of Sanskrit, the language in which it is written, the concurrent decision of all European scholars has been fatal to the antiquity, reputation, veracity, and authority of the sacred books. Sanskrit became a dead language long ago, and was known only to learned Brahmans. When the true nature of those books was made known, when European knowledge and thought were taught to Hindu students in Indian colleges and Universities, the authority of their scriptures was discredited, if not destroyed, generally for all well-educated Hindus; and the change was stimulated by Christian teaching and influence, which were spread both directly by missionaries and also indirectly by English literature. Most well-educated Hindus have consequently discarded the tenets of ordinary Hinduism. They retain a tender feeling towards the old beliefs which they learnt in their childhood, and may not be prepared to renounce their national religion, however much they may have drifted away from it under Western education and Christian influence; still the result remains, that their sacred literature commands their full belief no longer, and receives often only an appreciation based on early associations and national memories.

Hindu religious life has, in consequence, been waning, especially among the educated, for half a century, and the change has been strongly marked among the Brahmans themselves, who constitute the priestly caste. They leave their own proper avocations and turn to every other profession, especially to those professions which open out to the abler men among them careers of distinction, power, or wealth. Generally speaking, the performance of priestly functions becomes the occupation of those among them who, from want of ability or of means, remain mentally or socially in the old positions. It is not to be supposed that these changes have been caused entirely by the results of criticism on their sacred books, because successful careers will always attract many. What must be noted are two points: first, their caste privileges as priests and religious teachers have lost

their power to retain within the sphere of those privileges any members but those who can do no better; and, secondly, this result is largely due to the discredit into which their sacred books have fallen among the well educated. This is evidenced by the common report that those who receive education in colleges where Sanskrit is specially taught—that is, who receive in a measure a theological training—believe less in their sacred books than those who have not been introduced to such close acquaintance with those books. Indeed, naturally it is hardly possible for well-educated Brahmans to become champions of their sacred books when they know the books are full of errors and absurdities, and they cannot commit themselves to a profession which means the lifelong advocacy of what they know is untenable, while sacrificing also their prospects of worldly success. At the same time, they may not wish to repudiate their scriptures altogether. They prefer to adopt some other profession, especially when along with it better worldly careers are open to them.

The position here has striking points of resemblance to that in India, though it is not so strongly marked. If the results of criticism of the Bible are more destructive than confirmatory, and leave many matters in doubt, it becomes difficult for young men who accept those results to enrol themselves as whole-hearted advocates of the Bible. They cannot but feel misgivings. They may naturally hesitate to commit themselves to its advocacy by seeking ordination, yet they may not wish to repudiate the sacred book altogether, and may simply prefer to choose some other profession which does not require them to avow a definite attitude. The consequence would be a diminution in the number of candidates for ordination. This feeling would be strongest among those who have a closer acquaintance with the pronouncements of criticism, while those who from whatever cause know less would hardly be affected. This distinction obviously agrees in the main with a difference in social advantages, and furnishes a reason for the contrast

which has been already mentioned, that the diminution is chiefly noticeable among candidates of higher social position.

It is true that moderate critics, while affirming that the old view of the Bible must be radically modified, yet insist that the new view presents the Bible in a truer, clearer, and higher aspect; and it is a common assurance on their part that the theological value of the Bible as modified by criticism is not impaired, and that criticism has not overthrown any of the essentials of the Christian religion. Before considering what the effect of this assurance is, it will be well to revert to the comparison with Hinduism, for the position which is thus taken up by Christian critics has its counterpart in India.

The well-educated Hindu endeavours to solve his difficulties by a discriminating selection of doctrine. Now, in his vast sacred literature, opinions of the most widely different kinds may be found inculcated, and dispersed within it are high spiritual aspirations and beautiful moral teaching. Guided by European education and not insensible to Christian influence, he leaves aside what is manifestly untenable. He finds in some of his books the teaching that the highest doctrine for noble minds is henotheism (all the gods being but different forms of one Being); and as that is a doctrine which he can uphold with confidence, he maintains that his scriptures, rightly understood, notwithstanding all their errors, contain religious instruction of the highest value. Thus a Hindu, well educated and sincere, can reconcile his difficulties upon grounds not altogether dissimilar from those offered by Christian critics. If the critic maintains that the Bible loses nothing vital, the Hindu can make a somewhat similar assertion. There is this difference between the two cases: The Hindu has a vast number of different doctrines, among which he can select what he pleases; the Christian critic offers the assurance that the essentials of Christianity are unaffected.

Now, the assurance may be sound in the opinion of specialists who appreciate critical distinctions, but that does not dispose of the matter. Two things have to be considered—



not merely the opinion of such specialists, but also the opinion formed by, or the impression produced upon, ordinary people, because it is from their ranks that candidates for ordination come. Though ordinary people do not venture to criticize the pronouncements of the critics, yet they do exercise their private judgment, or perhaps their common sense, when the matter assumes a practical phase affecting their personal conduct and belief—that is, when the assurance requires them to acknowledge the claims of the Bible along with the imperfections and defects enunciated by criticism. The real point then to be considered is this: Does the assurance convince plain people?

How the question would appear to them may, perhaps, be put in a practical way. Criticism has virtually established a new canon, dividing the books of the Bible that are genuine from those that are not genuine or are doubtful. The former become the really canonical books and the latter more or less apocryphal. If then the former alone be printed and offered as the whole of genuine Scripture, plain folk would hardly acknowledge that the change makes no difference, or that men could enrol themselves as preachers and teachers in the same way as before. There is no reason to think the assurance is generally convincing when expounded in writings or addresses.

It is part of the assurance that the creeds and the doctrines formulated by General Councils remain unshaken, but this assertion does not dissipate misgivings. Even plain people can feel doubts that go behind creeds and Councils, because both creeds and Councils took their stand on the old view of the entire Bible, which criticism declares to be untenable; and the question obtrudes itself, not whether the creeds and General Councils are supported by the Bible as reconstructed by criticism, but what credence is merited by the Bible itself with the imperfections announced by criticism. It is the spiritual authority of the Bible that is the essential thing in the view of ordinary people. The Bible, if its authority be marred by serious imperfections, is for them a collection of historical, religious, and other experiences, which are highly interesting

and instructive no doubt, but has no binding claim on their obedience; and they wonder what warrant there can be for any doctrine of inspiration, and what special cognizance the writers could have had of the spiritual matters that they profess to reveal. The comment would be: "If they tell us of earthly things, and we cannot always believe them without considerable qualifications, how shall we believe when they tell us of heavenly things?" Such is the position in which ordinary people find themselves, when the claims of the Bible, together with the conclusions of criticism, are asserted over their personal life. Their world, whether of mind or occupation, is not the same as that of the scholarly critic. They look at things in a matter-of-fact way, and their view is summed up in the common remark: "No one is expected to believe all that now."

When a religion has been propagated successfully, its preachers have been full of faith in what they preach; and the converse has been true. A cause is strong if its adherents believe in it firmly. In every profession—of science, medicine, law, etc.—the members know that their text-books are based on sound data, and may be relied on. The position of the clergy with regard to the Bible is similar. It is their text-book, and, if criticism has proved that great modifications are required in its use, plain people doubt whether those who promise to teach it can promise without considerable hesitation and qualification. There is a general misgiving whether one can prudently hold a position, in which part has been abandoned as untenable, and in which he feels uneasy about the strength of much that remains. The extent and degree of belief that a man has in the Bible must be a strong factor among those which influence him whether he shall enter Holy Orders or not; and if the Higher Criticism has materially altered the old grounds of faith and left many matters in doubt, it must be one reason, and a very important reason, why the number of candidates for ordination has been diminishing of recent years. Its influence has been increasing and the number of candidates has been decreasing. If this be a correct conclusion, it is well to acknowledge it.